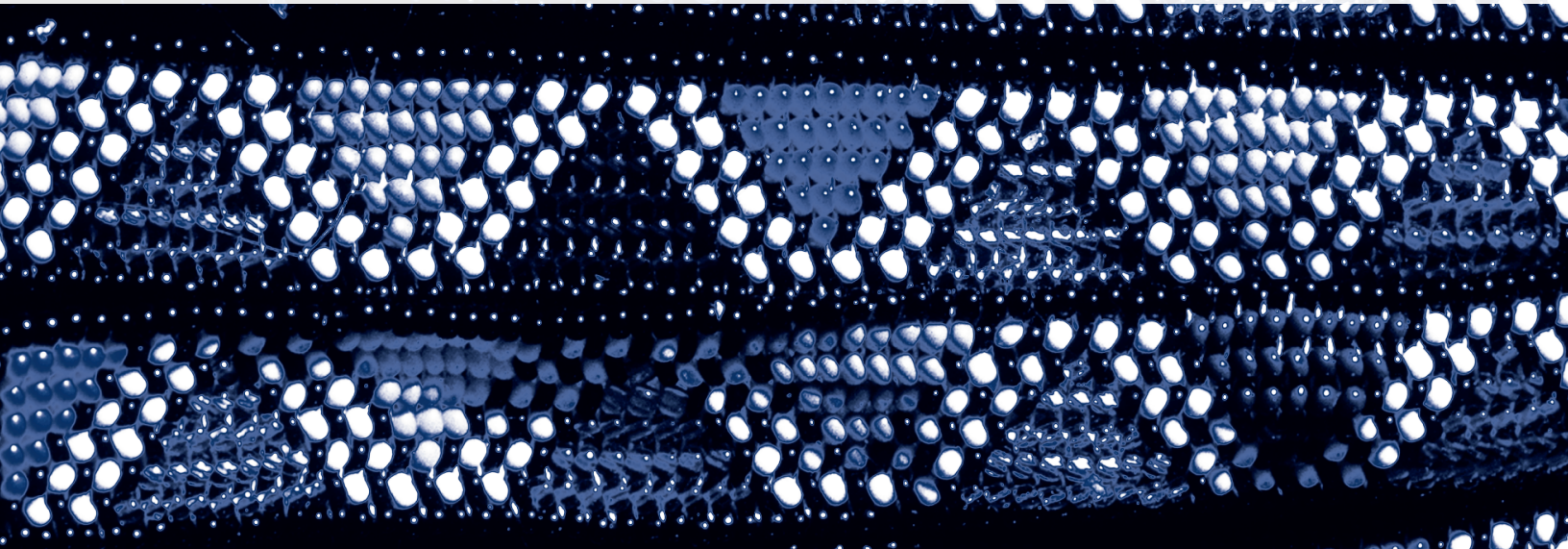




ANGLICANS, SEXUALITY AND SCRIPTURE:

A N A F R I C A N C O N S U L T A T I O N

*The Chicago Consultation*







The Chicago Consultation, a group of Episcopal and Anglican bishops, clergy and lay people, supports the full inclusion of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender Christians in the Episcopal Church and the worldwide Anglican Communion. We believe that our baptismal covenant requires this.

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# ANGLICANS, SEXUALITY AND SCRIPTURE: AN AFRICAN CONSULTATION

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# REPORT FROM THE CHICAGO CONSULTATION / UJAMAA CENTRE CONSULTATION ON SEXUALITY



## SETTING THE SCENE

From Monday 10th to Thursday 13th October 2011, fifty-one theologians, bishops, clergy, church leaders, grassroots advocates for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people and other people willing to engage in intensive conversations across cultural boundaries met at Salt Rock, South Africa. They came from India, Kenya, New Zealand, Nigeria, Rwanda, South Africa, Sweden, Tanzania, Uganda, the United States and Zimbabwe for an opportunity to strengthen mission and advocacy connections among Anglicans who are interested in the theology of human sexuality and justice. Although most were Anglicans/ Episcopalians, members of the Dutch Reformed Church, the Methodist Church of Southern Africa and a Muslim Imam also participated in the conversation. A list of the participants begins on page 18.

The setting of the Salt Rock Hotel, right at the edge of the ocean, served as a wonderful venue for this meeting. Each day, time was set aside for rest and reflection, thus enabling participants to walk along the beach, swim or simply sit and enjoy the ocean. The majesty of a full moon rise over the sea each evening completed a stunning picture of beauty, encouraging respectful conversation rather than debate.

## GATHERING TOGETHER

Participants arrived at the Salt Rock Hotel during the afternoon of Monday 10th October. Co-conveners of the consultation, Gerald West, director of the Ujamaa Centre, and Esther

Mombo of St. Paul's University in Limuru, Kenya, welcomed participants and read a letter of welcome from Archbishop Thabo Makgoba. The welcomes were followed by a lively "ice-breaker" session that allowed people to begin to introduce themselves to one another.

This was followed by Evening Prayer, which set a precedent for the next three days. Each day included communal prayers and singing. Tuesday's evening worship took place outdoors on a grassy lawn with the sounds of wind and waves and under a full moon rising. On Wednesday the group celebrated the Eucharist that concluded with a lively singing of the local song "Siyahamba ekukhanyen' kwenkhos" – "We are marching in the light of God."

The day's programme ended with a shared meal. This too set the precedent for the rest of the consultation. Sensitive attention by the hotel staff enabled participants to sit together without intrusion by other hotel guests at all meal times. Most participants made the most of this opportunity to talk to one another in a more relaxed and informal way, and many relationships were forged and sealed at these times.

## THE STRUCTURE OF THE CONSULTATION

Process, at this consultation, was every bit as important as content. The steering committee was agreed that maximum benefit was to be derived from people being together. The consultation was therefore designed to afford many opportunities for participants to get to know one another, starting with a Bible study. Participants

divided into six small groups of about eight or nine participants. The groups were designed to be as diverse as possible. Following many of the plenary presentations, small groups (differently constituted) met to discuss the presentation.

The overall “shape” of the consultation followed the see-judge-act process of experiential learning. The first day allowed participants to “see” by listening to stories of individuals and institutions. The second day introduced Biblical and theological tools to evaluate the stories; whilst the last day invited individuals and groups to commit to appropriate action arising out of the consultation.

#### **TOLD IN MEMORY OF HER**

After a short introduction and allocation of participants into six groups, Tuesday morning started with a Bible study of Mark 14:3-9, prepared by a team of participants from Kenya. Participants were invited to read the story with the theme “Inclusive mission in the 21st century” in mind. This report cannot do justice to the richness of conversation in each group so we record just some of insights and themes that emerged.

Some groups noted that there is ambiguity about the status of Simon the leper. Was he a healed leper or did he still suffer with the disease? Either way, he would have known what it is like to occupy marginal status. Nevertheless, the disciples were prepared to be in his house, but to witness the woman anointing Jesus was a step too far for them. In other words, in their view, the woman occupies an even lower position than Simon the leper.

As in many other stories in Mark’s gospel, this one plays with the insider/outsider nature of Jesus and his teaching and ministry. Crucified and raised outside the city, Jesus is also anointed outside the city (in Bethany) by an outsider. The texts on either side of this story deal with hostility to Jesus on the part of the chief priests and scribes and the betrayal of Jesus by Judas. One group noted that “God is at work outside the walls” and Jesus, the one on the margins, calls

those who are marginalized to himself. However, as a number of participants in the Bible studies described their own situations, the place of marginality is painful.

The woman who anoints Jesus takes on an act which, in the Hebrew Bible, is one limited to men. Some noted, however, several places in the New Testament where Jewish women anoint people for burial. If this is how this woman’s act is understood, it is less surprising. Others noted that the anointing was probably a very physically intimate act.

Several groups noted the attempted diversion of the disciples by calling attention to the poor. “The elephant in the room” is avoided by taking about the generalized “poor.” Something similar happens today when church groups refuse to engage in the conversation about the marginalization of LGBT people and insist that we focus on “the poor.”

One group noted a paradox in Jesus’ comment that wherever the gospel is proclaimed, what the woman did will be told in remembrance of her. On one hand, she is unremembered because she is not given a name. On the other hand, she is remembered by the embodied act of service. This might remind us that we live on and are remembered by our service, rather than our names or words. Mission is open to all even when ministry is restricted to the few. At the Eucharistic celebration on Wednesday evening, the preacher, regretted, however, that she has seldom heard the story told in memory of the woman.

#### **BODIES OF HOPE: STORIES OF GOD’S BELOVED**

The second session on Tuesday consisted of a plenary session in which the Rev. Winnie Varghese of the Episcopal Church, the Rev. Douglass Torr and the Rev. Alice Muse told their own stories. Two of the storytellers, the Rev. Varghese and the Rev. Torr are homosexual. They recounted their journeys of dawning awareness of their homosexual orientation and how each of them felt assured of being beloved of God as gay and lesbian persons.



The intersection of the faith journey, deepening spirituality and confidence in identifying themselves as homosexual persons was very evident in both accounts. The stories were inspiring, leading one participant to observe: “Today I have been fed rather than being called simply to be in solidarity with those who suffer.”

The Rev. Muse, an African woman, recounted the dehumanizing experience of being claimed by her late husband’s brothers as their property and being expected to undergo a “cleansing” through enforced sexual intercourse with one of the brothers-in-law. Sadly, her priest advised her to comply with the cultural practices. At a time when the church might have stood against sexist cultural practices, instead Alice’s priest reinforced such oppressive practices. She successfully resisted this “cleansing” nonetheless.

Alice’s story, in particular, became a point of reference time and again through the rest of the consultation, leading us to a reminder of how important story-telling in the process of deepening awareness of prejudice and oppression and opening up questions in a way no academic debate can do.

Discussion among all those present on these three stories was far reaching, and enabled others both to engage with the stories and to share their own. One important conversation, which was to be repeated several times during the week, was whether homosexual orientation is essential, or constructed, or both. For many participants this was the first opportunity they had had to discuss such matters in an open and safe space.

## STEPPING STONES

Following the stories of individuals, the group turned its attention to stories of institutions – The Episcopal Church (TEC), the Anglican Church of Southern Africa (ACSA) and the member churches of the Council of African Provinces of (CAPA).

What is not often acknowledged, but what was evident from the presentation by the Very Rev. Sam Candler, one of the TEC participants, is the long process through which TEC has come. A call from General Convention for a study on sexu-

ality was made as early as 1964. Twenty-five years later the first partnered gay man was ordained to the priesthood. Between these two events General Convention and the House of Bishops considered a wide range of statements, study documents and resolutions pertaining to homosexuality, including the blessing of same-sex unions. The headline-hitting consecration of Bishop Gene Robinson in 2003 needs to be understood in the light of this long process. Although TEC’s history appears in some ways to be a history of the legislative process, it was emphasized that the passing of resolutions needs to be seen in the light of relationships between people of different theologies and attitudes towards homosexuality who nevertheless have been able to find common ground.

ACSA’s story, told by the Rt. Rev. David Russell and the Very Rev. Rowan Smith, two participants from this Province, does not have as long a history as TEC. It needs to be located firmly in the South African political struggle for freedom. It was emphasized several times that the groundbreaking Constitution of South Africa (passed in 1996) has had a significant impact on the churches which have had to consider their attitudes towards LGBT people because of their entrenched rights in the Constitution.

The Rev. Canon Grace Kaiso then afforded participants an insightful summary of the range of attitudes towards homosexuality in the member churches of CAPA. The attitudes can be categorized in three broad ways as:

- ✠ A sign of Western imperialism and moral decay
- ✠ Something that should be accepted as part of the human condition, provided that homosexual persons are not given leadership positions in the church
- ✠ A matter of identity rather than choice and that therefore homosexual persons should be included.

The majority of church leaders subscribe to the first position. Support for homosexual people

and homosexual practice is viewed as a challenge to the authority of scripture, the church hierarchy, and a threat to the cultural valuing of marriage, and procreation and on all three grounds should thus be opposed.

Most participants were surprised to learn that there is a strong suspicion among some African Christians that people associated with homosexuality reap economic rewards. For example, young people who claim to be homosexual are given scholarships for study and visas for entry into countries in the West.

These presentations were discussed in small groups, differently constituted than the daily Bible study groups. Most groups noted the connection between the political/social context and the churches' discussion of homosexuality in the USA and South Africa. In other parts of Africa, the context likewise influences the discussion. Following the model of cultural leadership, many bishops take on the role of "chief." Participants from these African countries regretted that the discussion has taken place almost exclusively between bishops and that the rest of the church membership has been left out.

Some African participants felt that the liberal Western churches have let go of a serious engagement with the Bible. The challenge is for these churches to demonstrate a serious engagement with the scriptures, and not just through the rather sterile historical critical method of the academy.

#### **SAILING STORMY SEAS**

Wednesday began, as the previous day, with a Bible study in small groups, jointly facilitated by an African and an American participant. The text set was Mark 4:36-41. Participants were asked to identify the "storms" of their own contexts. A range of issues from debates about homosexuality to poverty, HIV and AIDS, gender-based violence, warfare and political instability, the global economic recession, child-trafficking and the breakdown of family life was identified. It was noted by most groups that Jesus is with the

disciples in the storm. This could bring assurance in our own storms. One group intriguingly suggested that storms and wind are the only way to get across the lake; otherwise we become becalmed and cannot get on with the work. Jesus' questions about faith and fear may be seen as a question to his contemporary followers to have faith and draw upon the resources we have to sail through storms. This insight into present day storms was much appreciated when shared with the larger group.

A range of answers was offered in response to a question about the reason for Jesus' sleeping, including one suggestion that the sleep was a foreshadowing of his death, when his disciples again would feel buffeted and fearful.

Several groups paid attention to the "other boats." This was especially significant in the light of the presence of a person of Muslim faith in the consultation.

#### **TEXT, CONTEXT AND THEOLOGY**

The next two sessions, moving us into the "Judge" phase of our consultation, were taken up with perspectives on the sacred texts, culture, theology and homosexuality. The first presentation considered how the Bible is used in the Zimbabwean context. Dr. Ragies Gunda, drawing on his doctoral research, suggested that the Bible has a life of its own, separate from the church. Almost every household has a copy of the Bible and uses it as a legitimizing force for culture and social praxis, including the practice of domination of sexual minorities.

Even in the academy, African theology is rooted less in systematic theology and more in Biblical hermeneutics. He identified a range of ways that this takes place. Firstly, in the inculturation movement the Bible is used to support the reclaiming of the right to the land of one's birth against the colonial occupiers. In this reading, sexuality (and more specifically, homosexuality) is not celebrated or even discussed. Secondly, in the liberation framework, the Exodus motif is used to support the restoration of freedom to African

people. However, as has been pointed out by women theologians, women are seldom included in the liberation movements as sexuality is the last bastion of patriarchal control. Men thus disallow discussion on matters of gender and sexuality.

Postcolonial readings pose challenges to the norms of modernity and invite a return to interrogate the foundations. It is here that sexuality is one of those foundational issues that fall to be discussed.

These ways of reading the Bible are, however, academic. Most “ordinary” Christians read the Bible confessionally, and not to destabilize but rather to entrench norms. There is a deliberate choice of texts that do not frustrate but instead sustain one’s given understanding. There is a “canon within the canon.” So for example there is a canon of readings, such as Romans 1, on matters of homosexuality. How one bridges the gap between these pragmatic readings and the academic interpretation is a question for discussion. A further question arises as to how, if at all, the Bible might be used redemptively by sexual minorities. One suggestion was made that it is helpful to start with a pre-commitment to a preferential option for the poor, recognizing that both the Bible and culture are steeped in privilege and power and therefore fall to be interrogated. This pre-commitment to the poor also helps bridge the gap between academic and pragmatic readings.

This presentation was discussed in small groups from which some common themes and questions arose. The speaker had noted how multiple hermeneutical frameworks are used to read the Bible. North Americans noted that this was likewise the case in North America. The dilemma of both recovering and critiquing culture was a question raised in several groups. A number of groups discussed various factors which shaped the way the Bible is read. Some factors noted were liturgy and television programmes (especially those exported from the United States).

In the afternoon three short, but no less significant presentations were made. Imam Mushin

Hendricks, the only person of Muslim faith in the consultation, wove together a story of his own denial, recognition and finally acceptance of his homosexual orientation, followed by years of studying Muslim literature to understand its attitudes towards homosexuality. Although contemporary Muslim teaching is strongly anti-homosexual, there is ample evidence in the early Islamic poetry of the celebration of same-sex love, particularly between men. In contemporary teaching, heavy use is made of the story of Sodom and Gomorrah. However, a careful reading of this text would suggest it is more about inhospitality and the abuse of power than a condemnation of homosexuality.

Dr. Sathi Clarke described the Hindu caste system in India. Outside the castes, because they are too impure, are the Dalits, the crushed ones. There are about 180 million people who fall into this group. About 65%-70% of all Christians in India are Dalits. Dalit is the name they have given themselves. As the crushed ones they imply they cannot be broken any further. In other words the term contains its own resistance to oppression. Dalit theology offers several suggestions when considering homosexual people in the church. The churches of the Anglican Communion frequently use the term “bonds of affection” to describe the relationship between them. When doing theology from the situation of the Dalits however, one might consider “bonds of affliction” to be more appropriate. In the Christian perspective, affliction brings its own knowledge of God. Recognizing that the powers of domination are clever, it is important for the afflicted to join together in a strategic alliance. To the extent that we have failed to do this, we should repent of our divisions. Secondly, working together, we need to reclaim the liberationist (as opposed to literal or liberal) interpretations of the Bible. Finally, we need to reclaim the great insight of the Christian tradition that God is Trinity. This recognition helps us challenge the norm of “sameness” which has often been the result of the pursuit of equality. Trinity reminds us that we are created in the

images of the Trinitarian God rather than the image of the monotheistic God of patriarchy.

The final presentation, by Bishop Jeff Lee, investigated the baptismal covenant as a theology and praxis of inclusion. The renunciations recognize not only personal, but also cosmic and systemic evil. The promises of allegiance are counter-cultural, challenging the western ideals of self-sufficiency and financial security. The promises call on all the baptized to hold together as church, to persevere in resisting evil, to proclaim the good news in word and deed, to seek after and serve Christ in all people and to strive for justice and peace.

#### **THE BODY BROKEN AND MADE WHOLE**

After the rich contributions and deep personal encounters of the previous two days, participants came together in the early evening of Wednesday to celebrate the Eucharist together. In a room overlooking the sea but centered on table communion, as diverse a group of people as one might ever encounter broke bread and drank wine together. What may be broken and divided at Communion level was bound up and made whole in that central act of the church, what has been called “the beating heart of the church.”

#### **THE COST OF CHANGE**

In the last session of the day, one North American and three Africans spoke about changing attitudes towards sexuality. The Rev. Dr. Bonnie Perry told the story of All Saints’ Episcopal Church in Chicago, a congregation that had been through almost two decades of change in its attempt to include same-sex couples, the poor, people of diverse racial backgrounds and people who are differently abled. Following Dr. Perry’s presentation, Judith Kotze, director of operations for Inclusive & Affirming Ministries in South Africa interviewed the Rev. Muse, Canon Kaiso, and the Rev. Ecclesia de Lange, a Methodist pastor in South Africa, who was suspended from ministry after marrying her female partner. The conversation focused on what it meant to stand up to the

patriarchal institution and what it meant trying to hold together as church in the face of many very different points of view. The common thread in all these stories of change was the personal cost to each of those involved in this journey. Once again, the inter-relationship of issues of gender, homosexuality and culture was noted.

#### **CREATING A BIBLE STUDY**

The final day saw the group move into the “Act” phase of see-judge-act. As a preliminary to this phase a brief report was offered by a group who had been designated as “listeners.” This afforded the opportunity to review the process of the previous days and to recall common themes.

The six Bible study groups re-constituted themselves. Instead of being presented with a text and questions for study however, the Bible study on the last day involved each participant presenting the outline of a Bible study designed to address issues of sexuality in the participant’s context. Each person was invited to identify a particular aspect of her or his context which needs to be addressed in order to engage with issues of sexuality. A text was then to be chosen which would assist in the addressing of these issues. Participants were then to identify what elements of the text might be foregrounded to begin a discussion. Finally, participants were asked to suggest what contribution the text might make to the participant’s context. Participants were invited to write these up as a resource for further use, thus enabling the experience and resources of the Consultation to be made available to others.

#### **SIYAHAMBA EKUKHANYEN ‘KWENKHOS’**

The final session of the consultation saw participants initially divided into two groups – the “Africa” group and the “North American” group – to discuss ways in which the lessons learnt, relationships forged and insights gained, might be taken forward. The two groups then combined these insights in a working plan. A short statement regarding the consultation was approved for immediate dissemination, ahead of this lengthier report.

The enormous value of face-to-face meeting was affirmed and if possible, these meetings should be replicated in other parts of Africa. Given the suspicions around matters of homosexuality, it might be best to arrange these at academic institutions, with church members invited to participate.

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*This listening report was prepared by the Rev. Canon Janet Trisk, who coordinated a panel of participants that contributed notes and observations. The group included:*

*The Rev. Babatunji Foluso Olugbenga  
The Rev. Dickson Chilongani  
Ruth Frey  
The Rev. Tobias Haller  
The Rev. Alice Muse*



#### RESOURCES:

The prayer/ reflection used at Tuesday's Evening Prayers comes from Joyce Rupp's *Out of the ordinary*.

The Chicago Consultation, Gary R. Hall and Ruth A. Meyers (eds.) *Christian holiness and human sexuality: A study guide for Episcopalians* (New York: Church Publishing, 2011)

David Russell *The Bible and homosexuality: What is the Spirit saying to the churches?* (Cape Town: Inclusive and Affirming Ministries, 2011)

The Chicago Consultation *We will, with God's help: Perspectives on baptism, sexuality and the Anglican Communion* (Evanston, Illinois: Chicago Consultation, 2009)

The Chicago Consultation *The genius of Anglicanism: perspectives on the proposed Anglican Covenant* (Evanston, Illinois: Chicago Consultation, 2011)

The theological committee of the Church of Sweden *Love, cohabitation and marriage* (Uppsala: Church of Sweden 2006)

Stephen Fowl *Engaging Scripture: A Model for Theological Interpretation* (Massachusetts and Oxford: Wiley Blackwell 1998)



# UNDERSTANDING THE COMPLEXITIES AND OPPORTUNITIES OF USING THE BIBLE IN DISCUSSIONS OF SEXUALITY: AN AFRICAN PERSPECTIVE



*Dr. Masiwa Ragies Gunda*

## INTRODUCTION

Today, (Wednesday October 12, 2011) our third day since we congregated here, we have spoken about the Church ad infinitum; in doing this we have all assumed we have also been speaking about the Bible. Our assumption as Christians coming from Africa, America, Europe, India and New Zealand, is that when we talk about the Church, we have spoken about the Bible. However, as fellow African Christians here would possibly concur with me, talking about the Church in Africa is not necessary the same as talking about the Bible (West 1991:81). The assumption that Church entails Bible has already been challenged by some African scholars, among them Gerald West in his book, *The Academy of the Poor*, primarily because the Bible sometimes has a life of its own, a life independent of the Church. In fact, one could speak of the Bible “outgrowing the Church,” especially because “Africans feel that their own lives are described in the Bible, they as human beings are affirmed in it and that they belong to the world of the Bible” (Mbiti 1986:26). These observations have to be understood in the context of western Christianity which had disenfranchised the African converts by insisting on the non-existence of any elements in the history of black Africa that could be in continuity with Christianity. In our speaking of the Church, even though we would all agree that Church signifies something more than the buildings, there is no doubt in my mind that when you ask African Christians where their Church is, they would direct you to their Church building.

## THE BIBLE AMONG AFRICAN READERS

Since we have spoken so much about the Church, let me therefore try to draw our attention to the Bible. While churches are sometimes 10 kilometers or more away from Christian homes, the Bible is in most cases within Christian homes. The most readily available “literary resource” for Christians in Africa remains largely the Bible. “It is the book. It is read in times of joy and in times of sorrow. It is read to instruct children in moral issues” (Togarasei 2008:73). This is the book that most people come into contact with after birth and possibly the last book that most people see before they die (Gunda 2010:71). This availability and accessibility of the Bible is the major reason why the Bible sometimes outgrows the Church in Africa. The Bible has over the century evolved from being the white man’s book to being “our book” as Africans, reading the text of the Bible for themselves, have discovered themselves in the pages of this once “foreign book.”

The Bible has risen from being a “suspicious magical book that speaks to the white man” (Banana 1991) to being the sole Word of God that legitimizes everything that people did, are doing or want to do in the future. African Christians will not hesitate to throw the question: “Is it in the Bible?” to anyone who speaks about things they do not approve but which things they also believe the Bible does not approve. There is a supposed oneness between the African worldview and values and those of the Bible, allowing African Christians to selectively and literally appropriate some texts of the Bible. Their “prejudices”

are therefore not necessarily understood as prejudices by them, especially when they can invoke the Bible to legitimize their positions. To this extent, let me clearly reiterate the point that Christians of all ages have not read Scripture to frustrate their aspirations but to sustain and entrench their aspirations and desires. This is not to say, their “aspirations and desires” are not prejudices, it is just that they do not see them as prejudices until such time as they are convinced that they are indeed prejudices.

#### **OUR INHERITANCE: READING THE BIBLE TO CONFIRM OUR POSITIONS**

This particular use of the Bible to sustain and never to frustrate their aspirations is not something African Christians can claim to be of their own making. African Christians, I argue, were not pioneers of this skewed use of the Bible. This is an inheritance! The use of the Bible by some Western missionaries, Christian colonial agents and fortune hunters provided the foundation for contemporary uses of the Bible in Africa. As I have a few minutes to do this presentation, I will briefly highlight some of readings of the colonial era, which clearly help in making my point clear.

The Bible, as I noted above, the magical book which spoke to the white man, was used to legitimize the plunder of African resources by colonial regimes. We are meeting here in South Africa, the land that was identified by some Dutch Christians as their promised land and themselves as the Chosen people. Plundering the land was therefore not a problem since they had divine title to the land. The same Bible was used in the era of slavery, when it became clear to slave traders that slave trade was indeed “in the Bible,” especially, trading in black slaves, the descendants of Ham, the cursed one. Oppressive and inhumane treatment of blacks was therefore seen as legitimate business and God had indeed ordained that business. Was this not one of the reasons why America had to go to a civil war? The “hamitic myth,” born out of a reading of Genesis 9, was the legitimizing text for such callous business. Clearly, the question of monogamy and polygamy/polygyny is a question

that is not as clear and straightforward as we all here may want to suggest. In Europe, monogamy became the way of life many centuries after Europe had become Christian. It would appear that what made monogamy appealing was not the Bible but capitalism, if my reading of Michel Foucault (1990 in: Gunda 2010) is correct. But this European cultural practice was transposed by a reading of the Bible that would not frustrate the European desire for monogamy, into a Christian practice. This was the gospel preached by western missionaries; God desired monogamy, even though this God had no wife! The idea of sex as an act performed by one on another was also clearly articulated by Western missionaries to the extent that only one sexual position was taken as “godly” and in that position both partners had their fixed position, in tandem with their God ordained social position. Man on top, woman below! This position was christened “the missionary position!”

#### **AFRICAN USES OF THE BIBLE WITH A BEARING ON SEXUALITY**

Contemporary African Christians have adopted and adapted the framework of reading the Bible bequeathed to them by the colonial legacy of seeing “the Bible” as the legitimating force; hence there is little or no resort to “systematic theology” in the everyday life of the Christians. Our faith is not based on some systematic understanding but rather it is based on a very deliberate selective literal, metaphorical, typological and allegorical reading of the Bible. The key to understanding the deliberateness and selectivity of this use of the Bible lies in what I said earlier: the idea is “not to frustrate one’s aspirations, but to entrench and sustain those aspirations.” Whether such aspirations are valid or prejudice is another issue all together. In saying this, I am not at all suggesting that African Christians are monolithic in their deployment of the Bible; these agreements are at a broad and general level. When it comes to particularities there are as many disparate groups as there are in the United States of America, Europe, Asia or anywhere else where there are a sizeable number of Christians.

In Africa, the engagement with the Bible, especially on the subject of sexuality or sexual minorities (LGBT community), cannot be fully understood outside the major theological strands that define African engagement with Scripture. I must hasten to point out the idea of non-theological biblical scholarship is still not well established in African societies. This non-theological engagement is mainly practiced in state universities. (I am here making a distinction that is in Zimbabwe between state-run universities and privately owned Church-run universities). The output in terms of books and articles remains highly negligible. This is possibly the reason why the prominent African scholars that are cited as authorities in biblical studies are the same scholars who have also been the dominant voices in African theology. The key voices on the use of the Bible are therefore those of “African theologians” such as John Mbiti, Laurent Magesa, Jesse Mugambi and others.

While there are various ways in which Africans have engaged with the Bible, depending on the theological agenda, African theology has often been categorized in a two-fold scheme of inculturation and liberation theology (Marte, 1993). This two-fold categorization is not without its own merits and even though I will here identify other theological approaches to the Bible, to a certain extent, one could argue that the other approaches are essentially an extension of one of these categories or even a combination of both categories. Of these two categories, it would appear to me that African liberation theology, and its South African counterpart black theology, forms a major strand in African theology. Liberation and black theology are mainly concerned with social-political categories, and their involvement in the fight against colonialism, racism and oppression gave them the upper pedestal when compared to its counterpart, inculturation theology. The primary concern of African liberation theology has been white and Western socio-economic and political oppression of Africa. However, as Emmanuel Marte (2000:127) indicates, liberation theology also is ‘a response to oppressions of Africans by Africans.’ He concretely re-

fers to the oppression of women, but in this time and age the question arises whether it may also include the oppression of homosexuals in Africa. However, as liberation theology has identified oppression and marginalization as its enemies, it is not surprising therefore that some voices, sympathetic and supportive of sexual minorities have been heard from among African liberation or black theologians, chief among them, the retired Archbishop Desmond Tutu (1997). He has made as many friends as he has made enemies owing to his unwavering support for the LGBT community across the world. The hermeneutics that made it possible to challenge racism, apartheid, colonialism etc, have been taken by Tutu as relevant and valid in addressing the subject of sexual minorities in Africa and throughout the world. In doing liberation theology a largely historical approach to the Bible has been used coupled with the preferential option for the poor as a hermeneutical principle. Lately, postcolonial readings have also begun to hold sway among liberation theologians and through them, opportunities and possibilities abound that issues of sexuality will continue to find their space in mainstream discussions.

Inculturation theology is a very prominent strand of African theology, dominated in Africa by Catholic theologians but equally recruiting from among Anglicans as well. It seeks to develop a Christianity with an “African face,” that is a type of Christianity that (re)values African cultural and religious traditions positively (though critically) and seeks to incorporate them in an expression of the Christian faith that is authentically African (cf. Magesa, 2004). As a response to the colonial denigration of African traditions, inculturation theology can be considered a theological expression of the post-colonial quest for African identity and African Christian self-understanding (Antonio, 2006). The emphasis of inculturation theology has been on the dichotomy of “Western values” as opposed to “African values,” “Western culture” as opposed to “African culture” and in this dualism homosexuality has been opposed because it is allegedly not part of “African culture and values.”

To this extent calls for 'authentic inculturation' have been heard, meaning that "the Church" is to appreciate and promote the 'African values of human sexuality and family life' (Nwaigbo 2004:336). These "African cultural values," argue inculturation theologians, correspond with the biblical and age old Christian values that the theologians derive from the Bible and the Christian tradition. For scholars operating under the inculturation paradigm, the historical approach has been used as well, but this time coupled with the hermeneutic of cultural particularism. Similarly, postcolonial readings feature in such works, but mainly under the influence of cultural particularism, which means there are fewer possibilities for inculturation to accept the destabilization of "culture" in my thinking.

As I indicated above, while the major categories of inculturation and liberation may go a long way in understanding the major strands of African theology, some variants refuse to be subsumed into these major categories and they have very good reason to refuse! While liberation theology was instrumental in galvanizing Africans to fight the common enemy in the colonial era, at independence not everyone was independent! African women, for example, woke up on Independence Day, to realize they had collaborated to free their fathers, brothers and husbands, but they had not attained independence. African women theologians are largely engaged in the paradigm of liberation theology as they seek to achieve what their fathers, brothers and husbands achieved on Independence Day! African women's theology has become a third and influential strand in African theology, characterized by a focus on the category of gender. African women theologians critically address women's issues in African societies, cultures and religions, and they persistently call for the liberation of women and for gender equality (cf. Oduyoye, 2001). In the last decade, African women theologians have been in the forefront of discussing issues of gender and sexuality in relation to the HIV epidemic, and they have developed progressive theologies of gender justice

(Phiri et al 2003; Dube and Kanyoro, 2004). It is also through the work of African women theologians that again voices are being heard that are sympathetic and supportive to sexual minorities in Africa. But even among women theologians, these voices are still largely "murmurs," still in the minority or strategically silenced, as they navigate the dangerous and gendered wilderness of human sexuality. Among women theologians, the historical approach, coupled with the hermeneutic of suspicion, was the dominant approach to the Bible, but as in mainstream liberation theology or maybe even more so in African women theology, postcolonial readings of the Bible have opened up new opportunities and possibilities that are challenging patriarchal prejudices and biases in new ways. These approaches may also open new possibilities for sexual minorities in Africa.

In my presentation so far, I have done what a mere scholar like me would naturally do, look at what scholars are doing. This however is not the complete story on the use of the Bible in Africa. All these approaches do not really explain how the majority of African Christians, the ones I said have one piece of literature in their homes, engage with the Bible. The millions of African Christians who are not trained in any Bible college, those who sometimes do not even know that they are theologians, read the Bible for confessional reasons. They read the Bible in a confessional approach, to aid, augment, entrench and sustain their faith! A confessional reading is especially sensitive to self-frustration. Among these Christians, the Bible (meaning particular texts) is read to address the question at hand, and the Bible's (again, those particular texts) position is always final, for as long as it does not challenge our comfort zones. On the issue of sexual minorities (in Africa, homosexuality suffices, and even so, homosexuality applies mainly to men and not women), the biblical texts considered explicit in their reference to homosexuality are taken as "good news, the gospel" on the subject. It is particularly among these readers that the challenge of Christian sexual minorities becomes a huge problem in Africa. Attempts at critically



interpreting texts of the Bible are treated with suspicion and where evident power dynamics are against them, they silently resist any attempts to whip them into line.

## CONCLUSION

With this final observation, let me dare say that there is a gulf among academic approaches but an even bigger gulf exists between academic approaches and the confessional “pragmatic” approach to the Bible, practiced by most African Christians. The questions that this observation poses to us here as we continue to discuss issues arising out of this presentation include but are not limited to: How can we bridge the gap between academic and pragmatic readings of the Bible? How do we reconcile the Universalist and relativist uses of the Bible? How can we make the Bible a resource for addressing cultural, religious, political and economic prejudices against sexual minorities without alienating the masses of African Christians? (Clearly, while we agree here that these are prejudices, they do not see them in the same way, they see them as values.) Finally, how can we make the Bible the place of refuge for victims of homophobia and homomisia? (Gunda 64). While these questions are important, what is critical is for us to note the importance that is attached to the “text of the Bible” by African Christians. It is what the text says that has carried the day so far on homosexuality, not as ordinary Christians would put it, “your interpretations!” This accusation assumes that ordinary readers “read” while scholars “interpret.”

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## AT THE TABLE OF GOD'S DELIGHT



*The Rt. Rev. Jeffrey D. Lee*

It is a great joy and an honor to stand with my friends here before you today. Mushin and Sathi, I am glad to be here with you and I hope to learn a lot from you. I want to thank all of you, my brothers and sisters, for coming to take part in this conversation — we are members of one another in the Body of Christ and I feel my own commitment to the Lord Jesus and the way of his cross has been strengthened by our time together.

It is a little amusing to me to be speaking to you today under the heading of “other theological traditions and resources.” I am an Anglican who happens to live in that part of the Anglican Communion known as the Episcopal Church. Now, I know that sometimes our actions strike others parts of our Communion as puzzling or troubling. Maybe we even appear to be something slightly foreign or exotic in the global scheme of things, and in these last several years in particular, to some around the topic of human sexuality. I do believe we have a particular perspective to offer, a distinctive history intertwined with the birth and growth of the United States, a nation capable of accomplishing great good and perpetrating great evil. Episcopalians inhabit a particular context filled with its own challenges and opportunities to share and make real in this world the good news of Jesus Christ.

We may be puzzling, we may at times be arrogant, unintentionally heedless of the full impact of our actions on other parts of our global communion, we may do good things too and let too many bad things go unaddressed. We

may be and do all that, but what I hope to let you know tonight in no uncertain terms is that we are Christians. Standing firmly in the great stream of the catholic faith, we intend to proclaim nothing more and nothing less than what Christians through the ages have always proclaimed: Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again. But that proclamation, witnessed to by Holy Scripture and the Apostolic Tradition, needs to be enfleshed, lived out and renewed in every generation if it is to be a living faith and not something else. As a great Lutheran theologian put it: traditionalism is the dead faith of the living - tradition is the living faith of the dead. And all living things grow, they develop and they change.

I won't try to deliver to you a learned treatise here, a kind of apology for the theological rationale that has led us to some of the decisions we have made. I will leave the careful biblical exegesis and painstaking theological analysis to others—I recommend their written work to you, fine work available at the resource table. I will say this though: I think rather too much is a little too confidently claimed on every side for what the bible actually says about this topic. But I am not an academic theologian, historian or exegete. I am a bishop. And I want to share with you a central piece of the work I do as the bishop of a diocese in the middle of the United States. It is the centerpiece of my ministry and a deep joy to me. It is the work of gathering week by week with the people of God to renew the vows of Holy Baptism. This is primary theology,

the church expressing itself in worship, gathering around the baptismal pool and the holy table. Gathering the people of God, inviting them to bring their lives to a sacramental encounter with Christ, and then reflecting with them on the implications of that meeting is what bishops are for. As I make visitations to the congregations of my diocese, scarcely a week goes by that I do not preside at a celebration of Holy Baptism or confirmation. That is common to all the bishops of the Episcopal Church.

It is common to the bishops of the whole Anglican Communion and the church catholic. If there is something unique or “otherwise” about the life and witness of the Episcopal Church, it may be just this: the rites in our version of the Book of Common Prayer for the sacramental initiation of new Christians and the renewal for mission and ministry of the already baptized—Baptism, confirmation, and what we call the reaffirmation of baptismal vows. Adult candidates for baptism, or the parents and godparents of infants, come to the font and do what Christians have always done: profess faith in the Triune God, declare their trust in the saving power of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and promise to make the way of his cross their own way of life. This is the pattern, of course, reflected in the baptismal rites of all the churches of our Communion, from the first Prayer Book of Cranmer to all our various contemporary revisions.

For the past 30 years in the United States, we have celebrated baptism with a particular form of the baptismal vows called the Baptismal Covenant. It has shaped us and continues to do so, I believe in profound ways. The framers of our baptismal rite made a faithful attempt to make even more explicit a central baptismal promise embedded in the English Prayer Book of 1662 and in every subsequent version: “Will thou then obediently keep God’s holy will and commandments, and walk in the same all the days of thy life?” In the Book of Common Prayer 1979 this rather summary question has been expanded into five questions, rooted deeply in the biblical

and catechetical tradition.

In a real sense, the Baptismal Covenant begins with a form of the ancient renunciations and adherences. As the candidates for Holy Baptism are presented the first question, what they are asked is a three-fold renunciation of the power of evil in their lives—the world, the flesh and the devil. Or as I like to put it, they are asked to renounce, to turn their backs on, the glamor and the false promises of security made by cosmic evil (Satan and all the spiritual forces of wickedness as the rite puts it), systemic evil (the evil powers of this world which corrupt and destroy the creatures of God), and personal evil (the sinful desires that draw us from accepting the love of God).

In the church of the second or third century I can imagine the candidates facing the west, the land of shadows and things that go bump in the night, as they made these renunciations. Turning around, making ritually clear their conversion, they would then be asked to make allegiance to Christ. Our Prayer Book asks it like this: “Do you turn then to Jesus Christ and accept him as your Savior? Do you put your whole trust in his grace and love? Do you promise to follow and obey him as your Lord?” It is hard for me to convey just how counter-cultural these promises are in the context of a society like the one I live in. The ideals that the dominant North American culture holds out to us are self-sufficiency, personal achievement, and I would add, almost above all, financial security (as we say), the lie that with only enough money in the bank or purchases made, we will be safe from harm. In a teaching session once, I said of these questions that they were asking us to put our whole trust only in Jesus, not in our accomplishments, not in our bank accounts, not in our good looks or degrees or the stuff we buy. A woman in the back of the room got visibly upset and finally shouted out at me, “You mean to tell me we shouldn’t even try to succeed? That’s not the Christianity I grew up with!” No, I suspect it was not.

Once the renunciations and promise of single-hearted faith in Christ have been made, we come to the Baptismal Covenant proper. It begins with the question and answer version of the creed, the symbol of faith as it is called, with its roots in the earliest centuries of the church's life. Our life as Christians—the very life of the universe, Christian faith would say—flows from the heart of God, the Holy Trinity, this divine threefold-unity: the delight of the Father in the only begotten Son overflowing in the return of love which is the Spirit. The creed is not primarily a statement of intellectual comprehension of the vast mystery of God. The word *credo* doesn't mean that exactly, as though faith is something that happens only from the ears up. St. Augustine said, "If you can understand it, it's not God." I quoted that once to a group of bright teenage confirmation candidates and a 15-year-old boy blurted out, "Well that's a relief!" No, we will never understand God, which doesn't mean of course that we can't know anything about God; just that comprehending God is not possible for created beings.

Here let me just say that I often wonder if the Christian way of speaking about God as Trinity in unity isn't aimed in the same direction as Islam's (and Judaism's) prohibition of visual images of the Divine. To say that God is Three in One and One in Three makes no ordinary sense—on purpose. At the heart of the Christian faith is a way of speaking about God that boggles the mind; it's a remedy against turning even this doctrine into an idol of certainty.

The creed isn't a dispassionate intellectual statement; it's a love song. It is a declaration of trust in God's never ending goodness, faith in God's desire to give us life, to communicate the divine life with creation, to place our hope in the conviction that God's desire is to reunite us with himself.

In teaching about the doctrine of the Trinity, I often make use of a famous icon that depicts the three angelic visitors who called upon Abraham and Sarah in Genesis 18. Taken together, the visitors are said to be an appearance of the

Lord. The figures in the icon are radically attentive to each other, inclined toward one another with apparent love around the table of sacrifice. But this is not a closed circle. There is a space at the table. It is for the viewer, for you and me. The very life of God is open, and God will not rest until every man, woman and child who lives is seated at the table of this divine life. This points at what the Eastern Orthodox tradition calls divinization, *theosis*. God is drawing us deeper and deeper into his own life. Human beings are destined for glory.

So our Baptismal Covenant begins with, and is rooted in, this vision of the divine economy. God chooses to enter the human condition in Christ, whose self-emptying love opens the way to reconciliation with God through the Spirit, who opens the possibility of living that reconciled life among us even now. As a favorite writer says, "Most of us think of eternal life as something that happens to us when we die; we'd be better off thinking about it as what happens to us when we really start living." Something like this reading of the doctrine of the Trinity has deeply influenced our understanding of baptism, and it represents a kind of counterpoint to an understanding of baptism that has primarily to do with cleansing from original sin. By the grace of God, in Holy Baptism we begin to participate in the deathless life of the Risen Christ right now. If God has invited all humankind to the banquet of new life, who can be excluded? The answer seems inevitable: no one.

The Roman Catholic sacramental theologian Bernard Cooke says that sacraments do not make true, they make real. We do not baptize little babies (or anyone else for that matter) so that God will love them. God already loves them. We baptize them to bring them into a community of faith that can demonstrate what that truth looks like, feels like. The newly baptized become living, breathing limbs and members of the Body of Christ, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit, the touch of Christ might be extended in time and space.

What follows then? How shall we live this

new life so that it might be real? There are five promises in our baptismal rite following the creed that point the way for us. I call them the “So what?” questions. As I said earlier they attempt to lay out, in a fuller way, the question in the 1662 Prayer Book, “Will thou then obediently keep God’s holy will and commandments, and walk in the same all the days of thy life?” These promises are rich with biblical themes Here they are:

+ Will you continue in the Apostles’ teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread and in the prayers? Will you keep going to church? The Christian faith is irreducibly ecclesial, communal as Paul reminds us again and again. One Christian is no Christian.

+ Will you persevere in resisting evil and whenever you sin repent and return to the Lord? Every sin has already been forgiven. In Christ’s embrace of the cross it is finished, but since I continue to sin I have to turn again and again to accept the gift.

+ Will you proclaim by word and example the Good news of God in Christ? Will you become the good news we preach? And when asked about what motivates your actions toward others, will you be ready to tell people about your faith in Christ?

+ Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself? Jesus himself tells us the greatest commandment involves precisely this love of neighbor. The rabbinic tradition has a wonderful story that we should imagine a host of angels going before every person we meet shouting, “Make way for the image of God!”

+ Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being? Will you vote? The prophetic tradition of the Hebrew Bible right through to

Paul’s insistence on praying for those in authority points toward our duty to work for a world in which all will have what they need, and not as a matter of charity.

As a bishop I lead people through these covenant promises week in and week out. They shape my life profoundly. I believe they shape the life of the Episcopal Church, and I hope they shape the lives of our members and those who are coming to faith in Christ among us. They point us faithfully toward the Lord Jesus Christ, whose death and resurrection has broken down every barrier that divides us. They describe reliably an outline of the Christian way of life that would be recognizable at any time or place in Christian history.

The decisions we have made as a church, in moving toward the full inclusion of all people in our sacramental life, flow not from political correctness, nor from increasingly elastic social norms, nor from an “anything goes” attitude toward sin, but precisely from a profound engagement with the central matters of the Christian faith, beginning with contemplation of the Trinity itself. My deep conviction is that the issue of the full inclusion of LGBT persons in the sacramental life of the church is not at heart about the full inclusion of LGBT persons—The Issue is not the issue. It is, for our time and place, about the unfolding realization of just what was done for us on the cross. It is about finding ourselves seated with every child of God at the table of God’s delight.



*Bishop Lee delivered this paper to the Chicago Consultation/Ujamaa Centre Consultation on Sexuality on Wednesday, October 12, 2011.*



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